

Viewpoint

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Three Small Island Primary Schools

Abstract

The introduction of a National Curriculum in British schools has raised questions about teachers' competence in small schools to "cover" all ten foundation subjects equally well. The system of formula funding has also raised questions about the administrative viability of small schools. The Isles of Scilly Local Education Authority (LEA) is by far the smallest of all LEAs in Britain. It also has three of the smallest primary schools. The author examines by visitation the viability of such small schools, and on the evidence provided recommends their continuance.

Résumé

L'adoption d'un programme d'études national dans les écoles de Grande-Bretagne a suscité des questions sur l'aptitude des enseignants des petites écoles à "couvrir" les dix matières générales de manière égale. La formule de financement préétablie a également soulevé des questions sur la viabilité administrative des petites écoles. La commission scolaire locale (LEA) des îles de Scilly est de loin la plus petite de toutes les commissions scolaires de Grande-Bretagne. Elle possède également trois des plus petites écoles primaires. L'auteur analyse la viabilité de ces petites écoles par le biais de visites, et d'après les preuves fournies, il recommande leur maintien.

The introduction of a National Curriculum in British schools has led to growing pressure upon Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to consolidate existing small primary schools into fewer larger ones. The argument in favour of such policies is that teachers in small schools cannot be expected to have equal mastery over all ten foundation subjects.

In addition, under the new system of formula funding for schools, as spelt out in LMS or Local Management of Schools, smaller schools are clearly less cost effective than larger ones. Thus, for example, a teacher's salary is now calculated on numbers and ages of pupils enrolled (up to as much as 75%). Very small schools barely produce a fraction of even one teacher's salary in the median range. Hence the popular aphorism in staffrooms: "kids mean quids."

So, even as the results of the first School Attainment Tests at 7 years are being studied, those LEAs with small schools are busily engaged in closing them, sometimes by amalgamation, sometimes by replacement schools in more central locations. Norfolk has recently closed 50. Staffordshire and Cheshire, to quote only two other Authorities, are actively pursuing closure policies, often in the teeth of strong local parental opposition. Indeed, one or two small schools facing closure have applied to the Department of Education and Science for "opt out" status, whereby they would be funded directly by the Department. If granted, there would be gains for small schools, not least in the form of a starting-up grant and a "claw-back" of some 16% of grant from the LEA. It should be noted however that, whereas the present conservative government inclines to favour "opt out" status at all educational (and other institutional) levels, the Socialist Party has stated unequivocally that if returned to power at the upcoming 1992 election, it will abolish "opt out" status.

The Scilly Isles LEA

This is the smallest of Britain's LEAs, having four primary schools and one secondary comprehensive school. Each of these primary schools is on a separate island as shown.

The details of the size and population of the islands are as follows:

Island	Acreege	(Hectares)	Permanent Residents	No. of Children Primary School Age
St. Mary's	1554	(629)	1500	134
St. Agnes	356	(148)	70	10
St. Martin's	586	(297)	110	7
Tresco	735	(297)	130	13
Bryher	327	(133)	65	7

All the other (smaller) islands, 145 in all, are now unoccupied. The Scilly Isles lie 28 miles WSW of Land's End, and are approachable by a three-hour ferry ride in good weather, or a half-hour helicopter flight, from Penzance in Cornwall. The Gulf Stream laps coastal areas, hence perhaps the soubriquet of "The Fortunate Isles." The main occupations on the islands are

growing early spring flowers for the mainland, and some fishing. A rapidly growing tourism industry is developing, some 150,000 visitors having been recorded this year. Many of these, complete with sub-fusc clothing, cameras, tripods, telescopic lenses, and short-wave radios are seasonal bird-watchers. The outer uninhabited islands in particular, lie exposed to the full fury of Atlantic gales, and in the past many ships have been sunk with heavy loss of life.

The Educational Quality of Three Off-Island Primary Schools

Given so small a population on the off-islands, the question has to be asked, "Are the primary schools able to meet the demands of the National Curriculum under the rigid system of formula funding?" Are the schools in fact "efficient", to use a term in traditional use by the Department of Education and Science?

The answer was to go and find out. Accordingly, after all the pre-requisite facilitating permissions had been obtained, the three "off-island" schools were visited. The fourth primary school, on St. Mary's Island, with 134 pupils on roll was not visited, as being considered to fall outside the accepted definition of a small school as one having a one form entry, or under 100 pupils.

Three Descriptive Surveys

St. Agnes voluntary controlled primary school

Premises: The main, indeed the only, classroom measures some 30 feet by 18 feet. It was built in 1840. An adjoining additional classroom is being constructed and should be in full use in the coming spring term of 1992. It will be a welcome, much-needed addition to the available premises, and the Head already has plans how best to use the space to optimum advantage. He is also in process of negotiating for the use of a former Methodist Chapel close to the school for use as a gymnasium for the children during inclement weather. Plans are also afoot by the LEA to upgrade a connecting annex in the school into a damp-proof area, the better to protect information technology, video and other electrical equipment. Currently the use of these items in winter is problematical due to the very damp conditions of the main teaching space.

Staffing: With 10 pupils on the roll, ages 5 to 11, there is just the one (Head) teacher, with no part-time assistant. Under LMS regulations, the LEA allows him the help of a part-time school secretary for five hours a week. It is understood the head teacher's wife acts as an unpaid ancillary teacher on occasion, two of their children being in the school. There is no mid-day school meals service, everyone going home short distances for lunch.

Curriculum development: This is a happy school. On entry, one is met by friendly, courteous children, all very ready to show and talk about their school-work. Each pupil has a box-tray of individual work which is carefully graded to match age and ability. The one 7-year-old took the SAT (School Attainment Test) last term, as required by National Curriculum regulations, and the head teacher was well satisfied. Much creative writing was in evidence; much of the math was problem centred; and all the children were only too keen to read aloud. An astonishing display of expression-work was seen, some by individuals, some by children working in small groups. Thus, many mobiles of varying design hung from the ceiling. Every bit of available cupboard-top space was used for things the children had made – leaf-collections, or clay-moulds, for example. Large paintings and mounted written stories by the children covered the walls. Nor were the children lacking in fluency in describing their efforts. One wall-space had been given up to miscellaneous photographs of school-activities, with written commentary underneath. One group-project on environment had included, as field work, gathering up garbage strewn on the nearby beach, then weighing, measuring, cataloguing it as appropriate, totalling it all up, safely disposing of it, and concluding with a powerful message to "keep our beaches clean." Detailed daily weather records were kept by the older pupils – yet another link with local environment where every family orchestrates its life by the wind and the weather. Some overflow library books were kept at the school, and occasionally residents would wander quietly in to borrow books. One most commendable feature of this school was the pupils' zest for learning. They had looked up Prince Edward Island in the atlas; they knew a few facts about Canada and were eager to ask the visitor many questions to find out more.

Instructional resources: The LEA has been generous in its provision of resource materials. School furniture is graded in size to match pupil age. There is an ample supply available of fiction and nonfiction (reference) books. In the classroom there are a small computer, a television, a video-cassette recorder, an audio-tape deck with tapes. The music syllabus is based on the Silver-Burdett Scheme, which provides, *inter alia*, a wide range of songs from many lands, with supporting music from audio-tapes for the children to join in with, and various complementary musical instruments to spell out rhythm and tone. A lesson taken by a visiting advisory officer was sheer delight with much enthusiastic participation by everyone present. Playground space is confined to a narrow path fronting the school, but it amply meets the needs of such a small group of children who use play time and the lunch break to practise with hoops, skipping ropes, and a make-shift trolley of their own design down a welcoming slope.

Summary: This head teacher is versatile, fully in tune with the needs of his pupils who readily respond to his warm, caring, good-humoured approach to learning. It is worth noting that the LEA wisely provides oppor-

tunities for him to attend occasional in-service conferences off the Island (on St. Mary's). At such times, a paid supply teacher takes his place. The very real dangers of teacher burn-out and teacher-isolation are thus overcome.

St. Martin's voluntary controlled primary school

Premises: The original stone building of 1840 has been nicely refurbished inside and a small additional classroom built on. There is a problem of adequate heating for the school, which the LEA has in hand. There are 7 pupils on roll, with an additional child of 4+ years attending part of the day. There is no school-meals provision, the children all going home to their lunch.

Staffing: Scillonian heritage is personified in the one (Head) teacher. Her father attended the school as a boy; so did his father, so did she, and so did her two daughters, now grown-up. After service in mainland schools, she came back to St. Martin's and has been there eleven years. There is no assistant part-time teacher, but the LEA, under LMS schemes, has provided the services of a paid secretary for five hours a week. The LEA also provides for a supply teacher when the Head attends occasional In-service Educational Training (INSET) courses or conferences off the island.

Curriculum development: The main classroom is light and airy. Each pupil has a work tray for individual work, and there are neat, orderly displays of expression work around the classroom walls. The children are polite and friendly, standing up to welcome guests, raising hands to ask questions and never any talking all at once. At the time of the visit, they had been doing a science project out of the National Curriculum: They talked easily and pleasantly about their initial failures and ultimate success, duly written up in their folders. A summer holiday assignment had been for them to develop a new skill: Answers duly recorded and well illustrated in a wall-frieze included paddling a canoe, learning to swim, rowing a boat, and how to use an outboard motor (under supervision). Another project designed to develop a sense of school community included one on fire-safety, for which the children had won a trophy, duly inscribed, and on display. The warm, caring attitude of the head teacher finds expression in so many ways. Two parents on holiday with their young child have been so pleased with progress made as to have stayed on St. Martin's. The school overlooks a sandy beach and the Head has been known to take the children swimming on occasion. A luxury hotel just built on the Island has a heated indoor swimming pool, which the Head has also obtained the use of for her pupils. Two children have special needs, and it was good to see an advisory specialist officer from the Cornwall LEA visiting the school for an afternoon and staying on to talk with their parents afterwards. The LEA deserves much credit for this initiative.

Instructional resources: This small school is very well equipped with resource materials; nicely graded reading materials, a television, a video-cassette recorder, an audio tape deck and tapes, a radio, a computer, and a piano. The school has also received the first parts of the Silver Burdett Music Scheme, which is admirably suited for use in small schools. The children watched a television lesson with keen interest. The second classroom contained a vaulting horse and wall bars of suitable height on one wall.

Summary: With the backing of a thoughtful, caring LEA, the head teacher provides a satisfying learning environment for her 7 children, and the prospect of the LEA proposing to take in "under fives" will further enhance the school's continuing viability.

Tresco voluntary controlled primary school

Premises: The original school built in 1838, has had later substantial additions, including a cloakroom, indoor toilets for staff and children, and a large attractive foyer. While the infant classroom is well up to standard, the junior classroom is having structural problems related to inadequate heating and weather proofing. Proposed infrastructure improvements will also ensure better damp-proof storage, particularly for information technology. The school is deficient in adequate surfaced recreational area (only 24 square meters of hard surfaced yard). The LEA is well aware of all these problems and has contingency plans to remedy them. There is no provision as yet for a school-meals kitchen, the mid-day meal being eaten in a room in the local inn.

Staffing: Currently the school has 20 children on roll. Thirteen from Tresco and 7 from the adjoining island of Bryher. The LEA provides a daily boat service for these Bryher children, collecting them in the morning and returning them after school. Up to the end of last term, there was only one teacher. Since September, however, an infants mistress has been appointed to take the 5 to 7 year olds.

Curriculum development: The infants mistress comes to Tresco with previous experience in an equivalent mainland school. She has already "twinned" the two school classes, the Tresco infants having written simple letters about themselves to their counterparts, and received letters back. Incoming 5-year-olds to her class (and one 4-year-old) are at once introduced to a stimulating environment which includes water play, painting, and sand play, and small and large constructional toys. Starting with basic pattern-making, they develop lettering and writing skills. The teacher gently directs different aged children to individual activities, and helps them. Concepts of measurement, number, shape and texture are all made familiar to the children in various forms of expression work: large, lively self-portraits in paint; scrap books of different textured materials; math work sheets with practical problems to solve. Their imaginations are roused by them telling stories aloud which the teacher then writes up in the desired style of hand-writing. Other

wall-friezes by the children hang in the school foyer with a great splash of colour. Her children manifest confidence in all they do. One 4-1/2-year-old read a book to the visitor. Another pupil showed the visitor around the entire school, including cupboards and washrooms.

The head teacher has all the 7 to 11 year olds in his classroom. It is a complete hive of activity, extending at times into the adjoining porch. The children work most often in small family groups. One older group was just finishing off a problem-solving project on burglar alarms (out of the National Curriculum). They had each designed a burglar-proof model room, based on their first ideas, following through with final design and construction. They then wrote about their failures and successes, concluding with thoughts upon what they had learned about electrical circuits. Two other girls had clearly mastered one use of the computer and were busily cataloguing all the substantial holdings of fiction and nonfiction books on the Dewey Decimalisation system for easier reference. An eight-year-old read aloud from his *Jungle Book* with confidence. Others were working on a series of graded problems, testing mathematical skills. Much attractive expression work was on display around all the walls of the room. It included personal stories, portraits, sketches, design-motifs. The pupils were most happy and fluent in describing which was whose. Yet another group of two were working on a history project, using a very large, well-illustrated history reference book which began with the 1950s. Some may criticise this limited span of history but there was no doubt about the pupils' exuberance in "finding out about." It certainly had relevance for them. They had also looked up Prince Edward Island in their atlas and found one in the South Pacific as well – which was news to the visitor! Some of the older boys were "mad-keen" about football, and were well versed in the current league-table, particularly in the performance of their club, Liverpool F.C. A football game in play-time included boys and girls alike.

Instructional resources: Simply recording the children's activities will demonstrate how well the LEA considers their needs in providing a rounded education, nourishing their personal and social growth. All these resources will gain from better housing when the somewhat Victorian habitat of the junior classroom has been revised to meet more modern standards. A study for the head teacher might well be included in any future plans.

Summary: This is a happy school, in which the children manifest those very desirable qualities of significance, success, and security. Learning for them is an enjoyable process.

The Secondary Stage

Though this question falls outside the scope of this paper, it may well be asked, "How do these off-island children fare when they continue their education on St. Mary's?" A brief comment might be this. In a report pub-

lished in a British newspaper *The Sunday Observer*, dated 6 October 1991 entitled "The Good State Schools Guide," there appeared the following entry:

The Isles of Scilly County Secondary School

Roll: 112 mixed (including 25% boarders)

Ages: 11-16

Status: maintained, comprehensive

Control: Isles of Scilly

New Head Alan Howells sets aside time for pupils

Excellent GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education)

results, *possibly the best from a true comprehensive.* (italics author's)

Though the 25% boarders of off-island schools hardly constitute the whole school, nevertheless, the overall tone of this report must reflect a wholesome climate of learning in their primary schools, which in turn proves conducive to good academic performance at age 16.

Funding

The LEA is well aware of its responsibilities with regard to the off-island schools. Both in terms of capital and operating expenditures, its estimates reflect a concern for present and future needs. The appointment of an advisory officer to visit schools and keep them in touch with newer trends and practices is but one example. Another is the appointment of an "Under 5s Development Worker." The Department of Education and Science has singled out this area of education for under 5s as one of high priority. Fortunately, it has also made available appropriate funding. This is particularly relevant to the needs of off-island preschool children. Relatively few in number, they get little scope for social integration or interactive play. Indeed, in periods of bad weather, it becomes impossible for them to meet together. On Treco, children already begin full-time school at age 4. An under 5s Group Forum for the islands is under consideration. This would comprise adults from all agencies concerned with young children, including parents. Parental involvement is essential if early education is to be successful, as experience on the mainland has shown. Such involvement has become even more imperative with the passing of the Children Act, 1989.

But the stark fact remains. To maintain the off-island school costs more money by far than government formula funding permits. With so small a population-base, community service taxation, whether dubbed poll tax or rates, is insufficient. Larger LEAs on the mainland can get by with as little as 20% direct funding from the central government. The Scilly Isles LEA can't. Last year, the government allowed the Authority to spend £220,000 (Cn \$440,000) on Capital Expenditure. This year's application by the LEA for £215,000 was scaled down to £16,000. LEA plans for upgrading of facilities must surely suffer if this drastic cut-back stands. In the matter of Grants for

Educational Support and Training (GEST) the LEA is seeking an additional £24,000 from Government. If not successful, programmes may suffer, and the prevailing high quality of education in the schools eroded.

But this much is certain. Both Department of Education and Science and Scilly Isles LEA are fully aware of their obligations under a whole series of Education Acts to provide an education for all children, fully suited to their ages, aptitudes, and abilities. Both know equally well that preferential treatment is a dangerous precedent to create. Yet this may have to be the case for these three off-island primary schools. One recalls these very schools were providing compulsory education for their pupils 30 years before education became compulsory on the mainland in 1870! And unless the surrounding waters fall 30 meters (a most improbable event!) they will always remain islands.

Hint For A Prosthesis

Support sometimes comes from unexpected quarters. The LEA has been approached by representatives of the prestigious Centre for International Studies to participate in an education project linking island communities. The other islands are Thassos (Greece), Texel (the Netherlands), Lamu (Kenya), and Viti Levi (Fiji). The aim of the project is to plan a clear curriculum strategy for four or five primary schools and one secondary school for each island group. This curriculum will be implemented, and then examined for the worthwhileness of the cultural and isolationist values it perpetuates. The issue of tourism will be used as a case-study. The bottom line, so called, in all this is that there are no cost implications for the LEA. Indeed, there are apparent opportunities for additional financial resources for curriculum development and for stimulating contacts with other island communities. So, like Wordsworth's *Happy Warrior* these three schools may soon have an opportunity to turn present necessity to "glorious gain."

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